

The pedagogical role of the family: beyond socialization

*Philippe Noens and Stefan Ramaekers
KU Leuven
Laboratory for Education and Society*

Introduction

With regard to the question ‘how today values are produced and transferred to new generations?’ we want to focus in this contribution on the pedagogical role of the family as making something ‘public’. First, we dwell on the ‘traditional’ way of looking at the pedagogical role of the family, which is, seeing family as an institute where the new generation is being introduced to the norms and values that exist in society. Afterwards, we describe how the pedagogical role of the family is being affected by the current discourse of professionalization and learning. Second, we propose a view that sees the pedagogical role of the family as a practice of ‘freeing’ some-thing of the world and presenting it to children. It entails an understanding of family as a space in which adults and children ‘come together’ and ‘in’ gathering make things happen. We illustrate our approach by describing a ‘pedagogical’ moment in one researched family.

Pedagogical role of the family: socialization

Most commonly the pedagogical role of the family is framed or thought of in an instrumental/functional way. The pedagogical role of the family is identified with a social purpose, which is, (unintentionally) teaching children that there’s something more than their own self (e.g., Murdock, 1949). There is a community that transcends individual lives and the institute family fulfils functions essential for the continued existence of this larger system (as do other institutes such as banks or hospitals) (e.g., Parsons & Bales, 1955). The pedagogical role of the family crystallizes itself in moments of socialization where children are introduced to the norms, values and rules that exist in society.

Although the notion of socialization became less central to sociological debates and the image of it has shifted over the years, the idea of families having a ‘public calling’ in the sense of initiating and introducing children in the world has lived on (e.g., Gillies, 2011; Lewis, Brannen & Nilsen, 2009). The public then is framed as an additional quality (e.g. it refers to the way the family, as an institution, plays a role in a larger entity). In other words, families are concerned with more than solely offering a ‘safe haven’ (Lasch, 1977) to the individual family members. In that regard, socializing practices – i.e. giving children the

necessary means to insert themselves into the social order - are considered as 'public'; they prepare children for a 'public sphere', that is, for something that lies outside (in place) and is happening after (in time) the concrete practices themselves.

Pedagogical role of the family: socialization 'under pressure'

Recently, a number of analyses have pointed out that the family no longer seems to take up this 'public calling' and that the pedagogical role of the family as socialization has shifted.

Blais e.a. (2008) argue that because of a number of transformations, the family no longer seems to be oriented towards preparing the individual for a 'public' life but is now first and foremost a place focused on the wellbeing of all its members. One of the reasons Blais e.a. (2008) give is the lack of consensus on societal norms and values. As a pedagogical institution, the family finds itself devoid of a stable frame of reference. As a consequence of this deficiency, the family folds back on itself and parenting is being reduced to (and understood according to the model of) "one-to-one-interactions" between parent and child, in which the main focus of concern is the child's well-being, happiness, optimal emotional development, and so on (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012).

Another striking change in recent years relates to the ways how 'learning' has become a pivotal concept in our so-called knowledge society. It has become evident to describe the core activity of the most different spheres of society in terms of learning and many problems (e.g., poverty, unemployment or migration) that used to be conceived of as social or political problems are now mainly seen as problems of (lifelong) learning (Biesta, 2006; Simons & Masschelein, 2008; Wain, 2004). As Ramaekers and Suissa (2012) and Furedi (2002) argue, childrearing is reframed as a job that requires particular know-how and technique. Parent becomes a verb - 'to' parent - and 'knowledge' about parenting (gained from experience, books, parenting classes, information evenings, and so on) is portrayed as a resource that adults can and should access in order to fulfill their duty. Moreover, parents are encouraged to see their own child as a version of 'the child' (i.e., an autonomous, flexible and independent human being, driven by a desire for self-realization) (Dahlberg, 2003). Parenting, in this view, is about doing something from which this specific 'type' of human being benefits from.

Several authors (e.g., Blais e.a., 2008; Furedi, 2002; Gillies, 2011) criticize this de-institutionalization that takes place and argue for a reconstitution of the family as a site where children are integrated in a story and where they become 'persons' (i.e., subjects which have acquired the ability to participate and take their place in a group). This approach, clearly,

relies on the ‘traditional’ notion of the public, which is, as seen above, initiating and introducing youngsters in the world. But the public role of the family could also be conceived of differently, namely *as part of the family*.

Pedagogical role of the family: beyond socialization

Instead of looking at the pedagogical role of the family as something instrumental/functional, we want to propose another way of approaching the pedagogical role, namely as making something available for discussion and new use (i.e., acts of de-privatization). In the dominant conception, the pedagogical role of the family derives its meaning from something ‘outside’ the family. The term public refers to a ‘public sphere’ or to a kind of societal usefulness. Here we want to propose to see the pedagogical role of the family as, in a certain way, built into the family itself.

‘Freeing’ the world

There are ‘pedagogical’ moments which have meaning in themselves (without being appropriated by something else). The term public used here refers to what is not ‘privatized’ in its meaning. Something comes to stand on its own, detached and freed from the regular use, and thus made publicly available (Masschelein & Simons, 2012). Meaning is, at least temporally, no longer determined through functionality; something has a meaning and value in itself¹. To put it differently: the pedagogical role of the family as socialization refers to a closed-in world (i.e. there seems to be an understanding of what ‘the world’ is and needs), where the pedagogical role of the family as de-privatization refers to an opened-up world (i.e. the world is detached from a private use and position and thus is shareable). The ‘world’ can be anything: things, practices, words. Something is being offered up and simultaneously becomes separated from its function and meaning in the social order. The pedagogical experience – the experience that is made possible by the family – is then the confrontation with ‘public’ things made available for free use.

¹ To describe this phenomenon, Masschelein & Simons (2012) refer to the Greek word for school, Scholè. Scholè stands i.a. for free time, not in the sense of leisure time, but of ‘time that is not yet occupied by something else’, that is free of the necessity and duty of for example labor and household. In the ancient Greek school, free time was available for those that not disposed of it on the base of their birth or place in society. The time and space of the school placed the productive life and private life of the house at a distance.

Family as a gathering

In our approach, family no longer refers to a place of initiation or socialization (from the household to society). Rather, we see the family as a place where adults and children are gathered around things made public. Hence, we see the family as a gathering of some sort. Etymologically, in Dutch ‘family’ (gezin) derives from ‘ghesinde’ which meant ‘a group of people undertaking a journey’. A ‘ghesinde’ was composed of people related to one another by kinship, allegiance, servitude and (financial) dependence. More specifically, family referred to a gathering of people who (figuratively and literally) moved in the same direction. Connected to this, we seek to study what kind of gathering the contemporary family is. Undeniably, this gathering entails many moments of inculcating values and norms (thus pointing to the traditional meaning of ‘pedagogical’), but we surmise that the kind of gathering a family is also entails other ‘pedagogical’ moments, i.e. where the ‘world’ can be made public.

Doing family

The concept ‘doing family’, introduced by sociologist David Morgan (1996, 2011), might be helpful to study what kind of gathering the contemporary family is. In general, the concept of ‘doing family’ embraces the idea of family as something people actively ‘do’ rather than something they just are or belong to. After briefly exploring the concept further by use of two important characteristics, we critically consider the extent to which the concept of ‘doing family’ allows us to ‘see’ the kind of gathering the family is.

First, several authors emphasize that the family is a social construct (e.g., Carrington, 1999; Finch, 2007; Nelson, 2006), but on closer examination we can see it is a specific kind of social construct. Rather than seeing the family as the product of historical events, social forces, or ideology, the authors emphasize a certain kind of ‘actorship’. As such, the concept of ‘doing family’ places emphasis on the effort undertaken by people to maintain a family. Adapting a terminology of John Searle’s (1995), we find that family is ontologically subjective. There would be no family without the experiences and practices of people².

² David Morgan (1996) links the concept of ‘doing family’ to his overarching idea of ‘family practices’, which are broadly defined as “those relationships and activities that are constructed as being to do with family matters” (Morgan, 1996, p. 192). The term ‘family practice’ is intended to capture the complex interplay of biography, society, history, meaning making and creativity in family-related moments. As such, the concept of ‘family practices’ somewhat overcomes the ‘actor-focus’ (i.e., people ‘do’ family as agents of their own life) seen above. Nevertheless, most authors write about the family as a set of relationships edified and sustained through human action.

Second, there exists a broad understanding of the concept of ‘doing family’, but the scope is narrow: the micro spatial and temporal ‘coming together’ of family members (e.g., Morgan, 1996; Smart & Neale, 1999). Most notable, perhaps, is the work of Marjorie Devault (1991) on family meals where the author focuses on the figure of the mother. By organizing the family meals, mothers not only find creative ways to combine family needs with individual needs, but they help the family ‘do’ family. The time spent together (eating) creates and reinforces a sense of family. In general, there are spatiotemporal encounters by which a bunch of people come to define themselves as family and come to see their presence and their membership as important.³

How can the concept of ‘doing family’ help us to grasp what kind of gathering the contemporary family is? We sympathize with the idea that family is not solely based on biological criteria, but have to be performed and is, in a certain sense, the result of continuous ‘work’. It is a ‘doing’, rather than a ‘being’ (Smart & Neale, 1999).⁴ In addition to this, adults and children are perhaps an *active* gathering around ‘things’ and it is precisely in the practice of ‘coming together’ that things can be made public. A ‘public’ gathering, in that sense, is a practice that enacts, stages and configures a group of people in such a way that things can be transformed into ‘common’ things, that is, things that are at everyone’s disposal for free use. When conceiving the gathering as a verb, as a “term of action” (Higgins & Knight Abowitz, 2011, p. 375), the family should no longer be seen as an institution with a ‘public’ calling, but as a space in which adults and children ‘come together’ and ‘in’ gathering make things ‘public’. In other words, that there are (micro) spatiotemporal encounters (around specific things) that can be seen as the staging and enactment of a ‘public’ gathering.

³ Most research on ‘doing family’ take as the starting point the physical presence of all family members on a particular time. Another array of social science research, however, shows how ‘coming together’ is mobilized over cell phones, computers or online environments (e.g., Daly, 1996). At the moment, research on ‘digital’ doing family is been carried out erratically.

⁴ But the verb ‘family’ is not the same as the verb ‘parenting’, since the latter entails a specific understanding of childrearing. As seen above, the verb ‘parenting’ involves that the parent-child relationship is being pervaded by a sense of the need for expertise in the upbringing of children, even to the extent that parents are expected to professionalize themselves in a certain sense (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012). The verb ‘family’ or ‘doing family’, in contrast, is merely used to highlight a shift away from an essentialist notion of ‘the’ family towards a more ambiguous notion of family. As such, ‘doing family’ seems more of a broad orientation (towards action) rather than a firmly defined concept.

Pedagogical role of the family: an illustration

June 2013, we conducted an ethnographic pilot study seeking to register and to describe different kinds of pedagogical moments in the family. To clarify and illustrate our alternative approach of the pedagogical role of the family, we will describe one moment in an ordinary day of an observed family, namely the reparation of a guinea pig cage.⁵ We are not interested in the way the parents and children interpret this moment (e.g. as being family-related), but rather we want to register and describe in a detailed way the *form* of gathering that emerges in this moment. Therefore, we will approach the gathering as an assemblage of concrete material and discursive components that result into a being-together where some-thing is or can be made 'public'. After briefly describing the situation, attention will be given to (1) the matter that is made public and (2) the making of something public.

Repairing the guinea pig cage

The family consists of a father, a mother and two daughters (age 7 and 9). After dinner, the father announces that he wants to repair the guinea pig cage which stands in the garden. He gets his toolbox and walks towards a corner of the garden. Next to the guinea pig cage, there lies a pile of junk. The father asks the girls to make a contemporary cage for the animals while they together will repair the broken one. The girls make a 'cage' out of things they find in the pile of junk. They let the things rest against a wall that indicates the border of the garden. While the father repairs the cage, the daughters act as if they are zookeepers. They write instructions for visitors on the wall and provide information about the guinea pigs. The mother brings a piece of lettuce to feed the animals. After the cage is repaired and has been cleaned, the family goes back inside.

⁵ One of the ethnographic methodologies we developed was inspired by the 'go-along' as described by Kusenbach (2003). We adopted the role of the silent observer who followed a child into their 'familiar' environment without interpellating or interviewing her. We spent an entire day with each child of a family i.e. from the moment the child woke up until the moment she went to bed. We experimented with audio-recordings (i.e. giving the child a dictaphone), at the same time taking notes and pictures. Afterwards we expanded these notes into full sets of descriptive field notes.

Matter that is made 'public'

At first sight, the 'thing' that brings the family here together seems obvious: the broken guinea pig cage (with the father as a pacemaker to do something about it). We acknowledge that the father and the broken cage play an important role in 'making' things public, but the guinea pig cage in itself is still a 'private' thing.⁶ Instead of the broken cage or the act of repairing it, we argue that certain things found in the pile of junk are 'public' things in the sense that they *do* something.

The stones, the hacked tree trunk and the wooden plate – detached from their former use – become, in a certain way, 'real'. The stones are no longer part of the outdoor terrace. The wooden plate is no longer part of the garden shed. The group of things is no longer just a 'pile of junk'. The immediate relations they have with their environment are cut off and they become something else. The pile of junk, that little piece of garden, hidden away in a corner, becomes something interesting. The things are taken out of their normal context; they are made present, disclosed. The stones, the hacked tree trunk, and the wooden plate invite the daughters to think and discuss, to try out and create. Off course, the things are still used as a resource (i.e. they become the 'walls' of the temporary cage), but the way the daughters use them is not predetermined. They could have done something else with them. At the precise moment of repairing the guinea pig cage, the daughters are being exposed to something of the world – something they did not pay attention to a moment before – and they are invited to do something with it.



Figure 1. Father repairs the guinea pig cage. *Figure 2.* Daughters make a temporarily cage

⁶ What needs to be done with the broken guinea pig cage is approached as something beyond dispute. Moreover, one of reasons the father wants to involve the girls is to increase their understanding of responsibility. Repairing the cage together derives its meaning from 'outside' the activity itself, namely learning how to take care of living things.

Making things public

We think that the gathering as an assemblage of material and discursive components plays an important role in the possibility of ‘making’ some-thing public. To state it in another way: the transformation of a thing into a ‘common’ thing depends on a kind of ‘being/working together’ of (human and non-human) elements which simultaneously emerge and mutually reinforces each other. By discussing whether the guinea pigs should stay in the cage while being repaired, the father makes the pile of junk visible, and as a result he shifts the attention of his daughters to the bricks and pieces of wood. To be precise, it is at the moment – and at that moment alone – where the father, the broken cage, the discussion, the pile of junk, the wall, the daughters, the guinea pigs, the grass, daylight, and so on are simultaneously present, that something has the possibility to happen. The ‘architecture’ of the gathering is relevant because it influences ‘what’ of the world will be opened up or closed in. Being in a corner is not only a physical state; you are also out of sight: a place to feel trapped or to be at ease and try some things out. Although things have often the potential to gather people, ‘public’ things do not stand on their own. Understanding the pedagogical role of the family as ‘freeing’ some-thing of the world assumes an active gathering where things can be experienced.

Conclusion

Describing a family moment along two dimensions makes clear that the pedagogical role of the family is not only about learning and socialization, but about allowing new things to be experienced. Pedagogical moments in the family can be moments where things are detached from normal use and become something of interest for children. A particular form of gathering, as an assemblage of different human and nonhuman components, ‘makes’ this possible. Therefore, the pedagogical role of the family is a ‘doing’, an act of de-privatization. Further and more detailed study to elaborate on this conception of the pedagogical role is of course required. In our further research we want to investigate in specific detail on the ‘materiality’ and the interactions that can be found in pedagogical moments in the family. In addition to this, we want to study which different forms of gathering emerge in the family. The hypothesis guiding the research is that family moments can have a pedagogical meaning in themselves which lies in the opening of a world and the involving of the children in that shared world.

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